

Higher Essay outlines

Bismarck & German Unification 1862-1871

2 types of essay (exact wording will vary).

- a. How important was Bismarck's role in German unification?
(a comparison of the long-term causes of unification 1815-1871)
- b. To what extent was Bismarck a planner or an opportunist?
(an assessment of Bismarck's policies & actions in 1862-1871)

You should not just describe or narrate how Germany became unified in either type.

A. HOW IMPORTANT WAS BISMARCK'S ROLE IN GERMAN UNIFICATION?

(a comparison of the long-term causes of unification 1815-1871)

Introduction

- the German states became unified into a German Empire in 1871 after centuries as separate states;
- Bismarck is usually given the credit for unification;
- but a number of other factors also need to be considered, e.g. French revolutionary ideas of nationalism, Romanticism, German liberal nationalists, Prussian economic & military strength, weaknesses/mistakes of Bismarck's opponents.

The French Revolution

- kick-started idea of national unity (& liberal government) in Germany;
- Desire/need for unity strengthened by the struggle against Napoleon;
- Bismarck was not even born then.

Romanticism

- Writers & artists glorified Germany's mythical past;
- Inspired Germans with a vision of a united country;
- Romanticism developed before Bismarck's time.

German liberal nationalists

- The first to take up the policy of a united Germany;
- Their attempt at a united Germany failed in the 1848 Revolutions;
- Bismarck was strongly opposed to liberal nationalism.

Prussian economic & military strength

- Prussia got Rhineland resources of coal & iron in 1815;
- Zollverein increased Prussian economic influence in Germany;
- Prussian industry growing rapidly from about 1850;
- Prussian power based on military traditions & industrial strength;
- Prussian strength pre-dated Bismarck's appointment in 1862.
- Von Moltke, not Bismarck, was the Prussian military leader.

Role of Bismarck

- Provided astute policies and forceful leadership;
- forced through army reforms in 1862;
- took advantage of Schleswig-Holstein crisis in 1864;
- outwitted Austria in Austro-Prussian war of 1866;
- out-manoeuvred France in Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71;
- Germany would probably have united without him but his leadership proved decisive in terms of the timing & methods of unification.

Weaknesses/mistakes of Bismarck's opponents

- Danish king's attempt to annexe Schleswig-Holstein
- Austria's international isolation – Russian & British neutrality
- Decline of Austrian power compared with Prussia
- Austria & France allowing themselves to be provoked into war
- French Emperor Napoleon III's territorial ambitions
- Bismarck successfully took advantage of these weaknesses/mistakes

Conclusion

- Bismarck important but could not have unified Germany without these other factors; 1815-1862 was not really 'the time when nothing happened' as Bismarck later claimed;
- Germany would probably have united without him but his leadership proved decisive in terms of the timing and methods of unification.

B. TO WHAT EXTENT WAS BISMARCK A PLANNER OR AN OPPORTUNIST?

(an assessment of Bismarck's policies & actions in 1862-1871)

Introduction

- Within 10 years of coming to power Bismarck had unified Germany through 3 wars - against Denmark, Austria and France;
- At first this was seen as the result of Bismarck's plan for a unified Germany under the Prussian king, and winning over the National Liberals by giving them half of what they wanted;
- *But later historians questioned how far he had planned it; some see him as more of an opportunist – using opportunities to extend Prussian territory and the power of the Prussian king – but with no long-term plan for German unification;*
- No successful statesman is either a complete master-planner or a total opportunist – they have to be a bit of both (plus a bit of a gambler?);

Bismarck's initial aims, 1862

- Bismarck was appointed in 1862 not to unify Germany *but to break the deadlock over army reforms* ;
- *He was a bitter opponent of the liberal nationalists;*
- Later claims that he had planned unification from the start – *but these could be boastful and/or distorted by hindsight;*
- His 'iron & blood' speech refers not to German unification *but to Prussia's frontiers;*
- So in 1862 probably no plan for unification *but possible opportunities to extend Prussian territory and the power of the Prussian king;*
- Support for Russia against Poles - part of plan to stop Russia supporting Austria - *or more out of fear of Prussian Poles (Russia & Austria had already fallen out over Crimean War);*
- Boycott of Congress of Princes - part of a Prussian plan for unification – *or more to prevent Austria taking the lead in Germany;*

Schleswig-Holstein Crisis, 1864

- *King of Denmark, not Bismarck, provoked crisis by attempting to annexe German-speaking Schleswig & Holstein - providing Bismarck with an opportunity to get them for Prussia;*
- Some have seen Bismarck's involvement of Austria as part of a cunning plan to provoke war with Austria at a later date in order to set the stage for a Prussian dominated unified Germany;
- *Others say it is more likely that he involved Austria to lessen the risk of international opposition, while looking for a chance eventually to get both territories for Prussia;*

Austro-Prussian War, 1866

- Some say Bismarck deliberately prepared for and provoked war with Austria as part of a long-term plan for German unification;
- His alliance with Italy and negotiations with France can be seen as evidence of him preparing for war with Austria;

- His accusations against Austria over Holstein can be seen as evidence of deliberate provocation of Austria into war;
- The easy Prussian victory can be seen as the result of careful diplomatic and military planning;
- The formation of the North German Confederation after the war can be seen as confirmation of Bismarck's aims & planning;
- *Others say that Bismarck knew that he would have to face Austria down as the main obstacle to Prussian expansionism and was prepared to do this by war if necessary, but that this should not be seen as part of a long-term master-plan for German unification;*

Franco-Prussian War, 1870-71

- Did B deliberately prepare for and provoke war with France as part of a long-term plan for German unification - *or was he simply prepared to face France down as the next obstacle to Prussian expansion?*
- Were the lenient peace terms with Austria to keep her out of a future war with France - *or to prevent international outcry against Prussia?*
- Did Bismarck deliberately lead Napoleon III on with territorial promises - *or was Napoleon the victim of his own greed & illusions?*
- Were B's secret treaties with the southern German states part of a plan for war against France - *or just another extension of Prussian power?*
- Was B's encouragement of the Hohenzollern candidate for the Spanish throne a deliberate provocation of France - *or just seizing an opportunity to extend Prussian influence?*
- Did he edit the Ems Telegram to provoke France into war – *or was it intended more to test and humiliate France?*
- Was the easy Prussian victory again evidence of careful planning – *or was it more the result of French diplomatic & military incompetence?*
- Was the declaration of the German Empire the culmination of B's long-term plan for a unified Germany – *or was he opportunistically taking advantage of Prussia's victory over France?*

Conclusion

- *At first Bismarck was probably not so much planning for German unification as looking for opportunities to extend Prussian territory and power;*
- As the decade progressed, and he became more experienced and confident, the element of planning became stronger; he became a better judge of the possibilities open to him; and he became better at exploiting and even creating opportunities for Prussian expansion;
- *It is unlikely that he had a master-plan for German unification from the start, but by the second half of the 1860s he increasingly saw the possibilities of a Prussian dominated unified German;*
- To adapt his own analogy – *in the 1st half of the 1860s he was wandering about among the trees in the form of opportunities to expand Prussian territory and power; but in the 2nd half of the decade he could increasingly see and plan the shape of the wood in the form of a Prussian dominated united Germany.*